Hackney:

An Uncommon History in Five Parts

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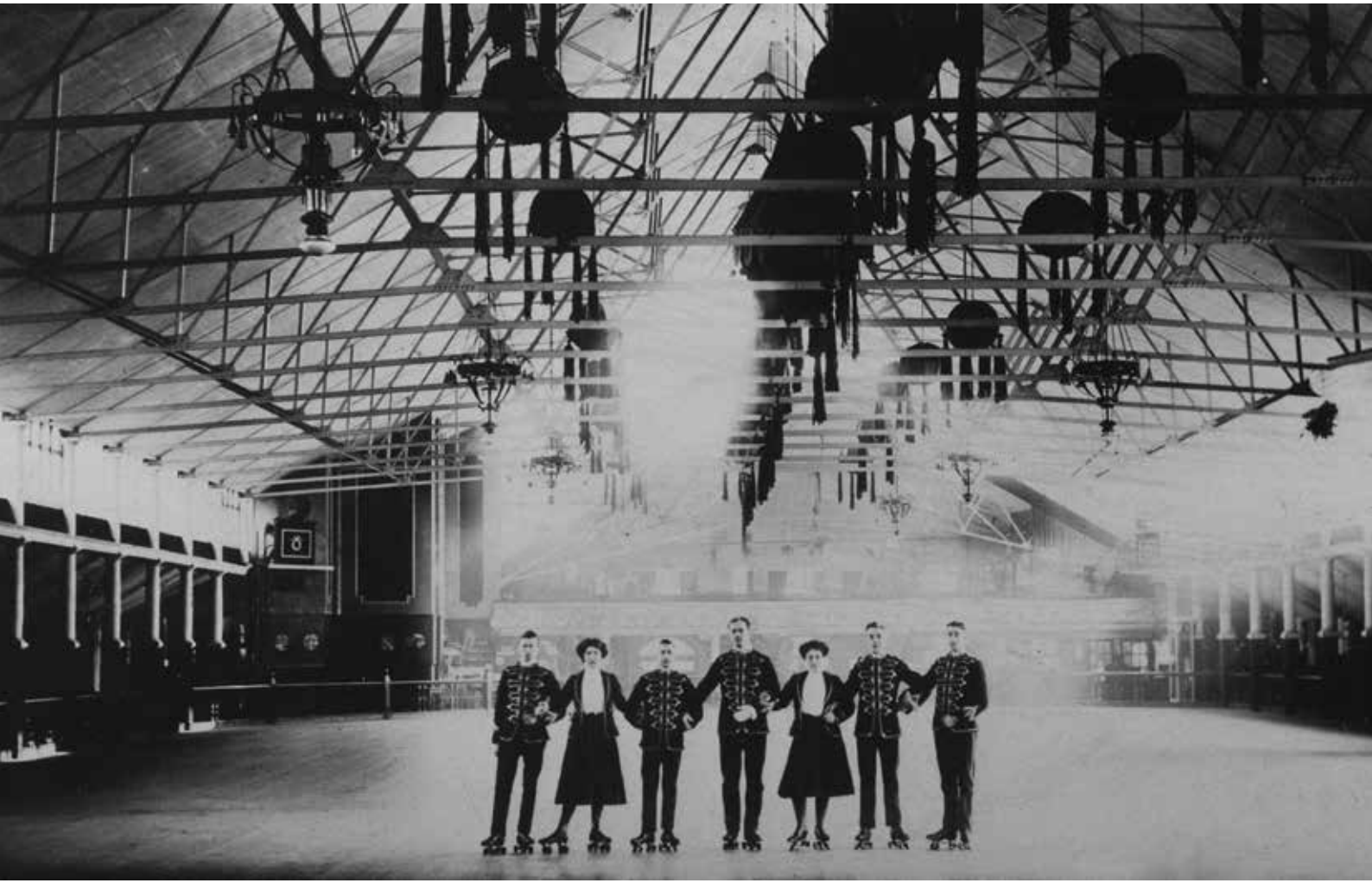
Edited by Margaret Willes

Hackney Society



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Cover, The Olympic Park. (Grant Smith, www.grant-smith.com)

Frontispiece, Interior of the abandoned German Hospital in the 1990s, before gentrification. (Glory Hall)

Left, The Premier Skating Rink in Clapton, *c.*1912. (Hackney Archives)

Inside back cover, The Horse and Groom, by the River Lea, engraving 1830. (Hackney Archives)

The Hackney Society works to preserve Hackney's unique heritage and make the area a better place in which to live and work. Formed in 1967 it seeks to involve and support local people in the regeneration and conservation of Hackney's built environment and open spaces. We aim to promote high standards of planning, architecture and conservation in Hackney; give a voice to local people in the future development of the borough; and educate and foster public interest in the history, architecture and character of Hackney.

The Society meets monthly for a programme of walks, tours and talks about Hackney's modern and historic buildings; publishes books, newsletters and walks on that subject; organises special community projects; and comments on planning applications.

The Hackney Society is a membership organisation and is a registered charitable company. An elected board of trustees, drawn from the membership, manages the work of the Society. The Hackney Society is a civic and amenity society.

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The Round Chapel
1d Glenarm Road
London E5 0LY

info@hackneysociety.org
www.hackneysociety.org

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Edited by Margaret Willes

Editorial assistants: Frances Elks and Helen King
Designed by Design@GloryHall.com

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Editor's Foreword

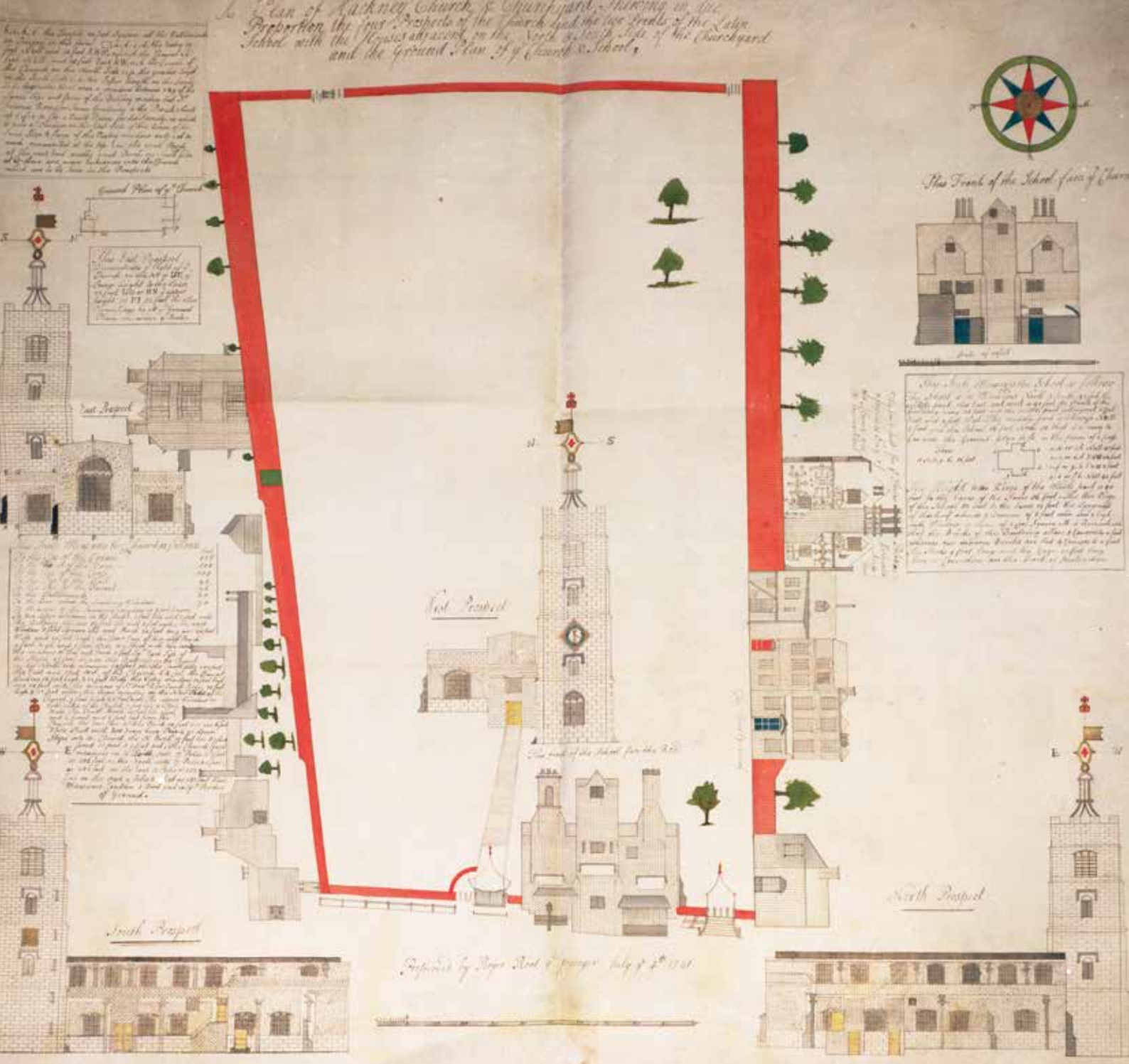
The idea for this book came from Ann Robey. This proved irresistible, though the schedule was terrifying, given the deadline presented by the London 2012 Olympics. It is a tribute to the contributors that the book has come to fruition, especially as they have all provided their texts without remuneration. The Hackney Society is deeply grateful to them.

This is not a conventional history of Hackney, nor is it intended to be comprehensive. The authors have been given *carte blanche* to choose what they considered the defining aspects of the three parishes of Hackney, Stoke Newington and Shoreditch at a particular date, the retrospective anniversaries of the 2012 Olympics. Although buildings come into the story, especially those that can still be seen and sometimes visited, it is the people who occupy centre stage. And what a fascinating cast of characters they have proved. Thomas Sutton, for instance, whose penny-pinching mode of living resulted in one of the most generous bequests of the Jacobean age. Dudley Ryder, son of a dissenting Hackney linen draper, who kept a frank diary worthy of comparison to Samuel Pepys, chronicling the life of the village in the early 18th century. Anna Laetitia Barbauld, another dissenter, who brought her literary career to an end in 1812 when she prophesied that the British Empire would have to make way for the rising power of the United States of America. Marie Lloyd, one of the great music-hall stars of the turn of the last century, with her risqué songs and scandalous lifestyle.

It is our hope, with this 'uncommon history', to entertain not only those who live in the borough or are familiar with its great variety of people and places, but also those who are brought here for the first time with the events of the Games.

People have been very generous with their support. First of all we are very grateful to Edward Benyon, the trustees of the Benyon Estate and Macdonald Wright Architects for giving us funds to enable this book to be published. Hackney Archives, reopening just in time, have been helpful and generous in the supply of pictures, and I would particularly like to thank Elizabeth Green. Grant Smith moved with lightning speed to take the very fine photograph on the front cover. Thanks also to Laurie Elks, Patrick Hammill, Hannah Parham, Stephen Selby, Holly Stout, Daniel Betts, Jean Field, Jane Howe and Julia Lafferty. Lastly, thanks must go to Glory Hall who has coped with the design and production, remaining calm throughout the hectic schedule.

Margaret Willes



A Plan of Hackney Church & Churchyard, shewing in due Proportion the four Prospects of the Church and the two Fronts of the Latin School with the Houses adjacent on the North & South Side of the Churchyard and the Ground Plan of ye Church & School.
Ground Plan of ye Church
This East Prospect
East Prospect
West Prospect
South Prospect
North Prospect
This Front of the School faces ye Church

Hackney: 1612

Margaret Willes

Today, the predominant colour in Hackney is grey – buildings and streets. But a visitor in 1612 would have seen a landscape principally of green – fields, some woods, with little settlements strung out along roads and tracks – and here and there flashes of water.

The current borough takes in three medieval parishes: St Augustine's, Hackney; St Mary's, Stoke Newington; and St Leonard's, Shoreditch. The church of St Augustine, renamed as St John's in 1660, was demolished in the late 18th century, although the tower remains, the oldest building in Hackney. St Leonard's was also demolished in the 18th century, and a new church built on the site in Shoreditch High Street. The brick Tudor church of St Mary in Stoke Newington has survived, across the road from its Victorian successor. In 1612 all three parishes were part of the bishop of London's great manor of Stepney, administered by the dean and chapter of St Paul's Cathedral.

The village of Hackney was situated two miles from the bar of London at Bishopsgate, with access into the City by way of the Roman road from Lincoln, Ermine Street (now Kingsland Road) and a second from Cambridge (now Mare Street). Tracks led eastwards to the River Lea, and in the early 17th century these two systems of communication were important factors in defining the character of Hackney and the surrounding hamlets of Dalston, Shacklewell, Stamford Hill, Clapton, Homerton and Hackney Wick.

At the centre of the village of Hackney stood St Augustine's Church, which is thought to have been founded in the 13th century by the military Knights Templar as they followed the rule of St Augustine of Hippo. The church was substantially rebuilt *c.*1519 at the expense of two leading members of the Tudor administration, Christopher Urswick and Sir John Heron. The church, of Kentish ragstone, was laid out as a nave with north and south aisles, and a north porch. The tower's survival is due to the fact that the steeple of the 18th-century replacement was not at first trusted to carry the weight of the bells. Also surviving are some of the Tudor and Jacobean monuments, including that of Urswick, which were moved into the new church of St John.

In 1612 Hackney, with its surrounding settlements, was comparatively populous. Church rates in 1605

Plan of Hackney churchyard and the surrounding buildings. Although this was drawn by the surveyor Robert Root in 1741, it provides a good picture of Hackney village in 1612 with the church of St Augustine's and Church House, the home of Christopher Urswick at the beginning of the 16th century. (Hackney Archives)

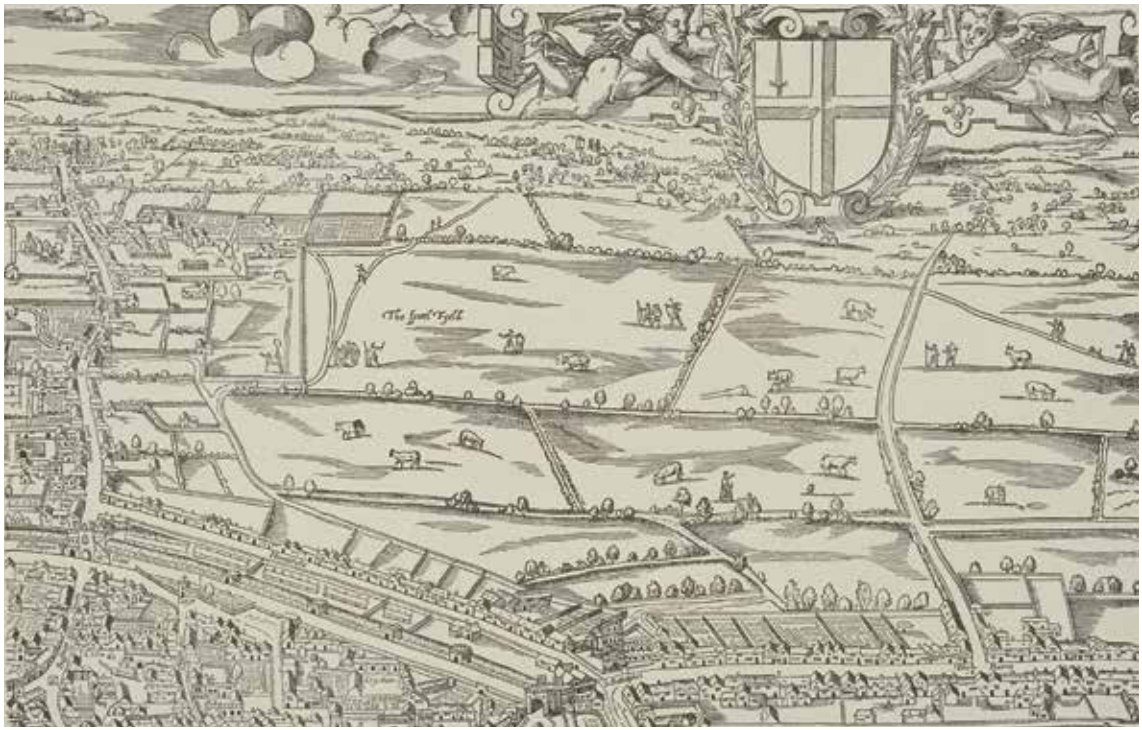
reveal nearly 200 landholders, plus 29 'non doms'. The area around the church, known as Church Street, had 34 rate payers, but the most prosperous part of the parish was nearby Homerton with 49 contributors. Several were aristocrats, while others were City merchants. Hackney could offer a healthy environment – one Tudor courtier remarked about how the village was not affected by the plague – yet was within easy access to London. As the 17th century progressed the proportion between aristocrat and trade was to alter, when the royal court moved westwards to St James's Palace and Whitehall, but in 1612 it was fairly evenly balanced.

To the north-west of Hackney was the parish of St Mary's in Stoke Newington, with its little church associated from the 14th century with the dean and chapter of St Paul's Cathedral. In the mid-16th century the lord of the manor and humanist scholar, William Patten, undertook an almost complete reconstruction of the building, making it a rare example of a church built in the troubled period of the Elizabethan Settlement. It served a community that was much smaller than Hackney, with approximately 80 households, although the composition of the population was very similar, with aristocrats and rich merchants alongside working men and women. Stoke Newington's position on Ermine Street meant that it supported several hostelries.

In the play, *Knight of the Burning Pestle*, written in the first years of the 17th century, Beaumont and Fletcher referred to travelling out from London 'to Hogsden [Hoxton] or to Newington where ale and cakes are plenty'.

The third parish, St Leonard's, Shoreditch, was quite different in character. As a suburb immediately outside the walls of the City of London, it supported a much larger population: the church registers for 1612 show that while Stoke Newington had 13 christenings, St Augustine recorded 45 and St Leonard 148. Shoreditch could not offer the bracing climate of Stoke Newington or Hackney and although there were some merchants and courtiers recorded as residents, they would have been very much in the minority compared to the working population. Before the Reformation this area had been dominated by religious houses, including the Augustinian priory of Holywell and the priory of St Mary Spital, but by 1612 it had taken on the character of a shanty town with poor cottages spreading through the former monastic fields and gardens. In 1589 Elizabeth I issued an act requiring new cottages to have at least four acres of land attached. This legislation was intended to restrict the growth of inferior houses that were springing up in Shoreditch, and neighbouring Stepney and Bethnal Green. More proclamations and statutes followed, first from Elizabeth, and then James I, but to no avail.

It is not known when St Leonard's Church was first built, but an 18th-century view of its east end shows a sprawling church with three aisles, lit by windows in the 15th-century Perpendicular style. People buried in the church included Will Somers, Henry



VIII's jester and the one man who could cheer him up in the last years of his reign with his increasing ill health, the actor Gabriel Spencer who was killed in a duel by the dramatist Ben Jonson in 1598, and William Shakespeare's close friend, Richard, son of James Burbage.

Spitalfields and Hoxton today are known for their resident artists: in Jacobean London the area was famous, or infamous, for its dramatists and actors. In 1576 James Burbage, taking advantage of the fact that he was beyond the reach of City censorship and taxation, built London's first purpose-built playhouse, simply called 'The Theatre', in Shoreditch, with The Curtain in Finsbury Fields following soon after. When a preacher at St Paul's Cross described The Theatre as 'the gorgeous Playing-place erected in the fields', he was not paying it a compliment, for he went on to compare it to 'the old heathenish Theatre at Rome' as the 'showpiece of all beastly and filthy matters'.

Many of Shakespeare's plays, including *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors* and *Romeo and Juliet,* were

Detail from the 'Agas' map of London published *c.*1600, showing the north-east corner of the City. Men practising their archery skills can be seen in the fields beyond which stretch up through Shoreditch and Hoxton. (City of London, London Metropolitan Archives)

first performed at The Theatre and The Curtain. Such performances could be raucous affairs. An Italian visitor describes going to a play at The Curtain with the Venetian Ambassador, Foscarini: 'It is an infamous place in which no good citizen or gentleman would show his face.' Foscarini insisted on standing amongst 'the gang of porters and carters, giving as his excuse that he was hard of hearing – as if he could have understood the language anyway'. The evening ended in a near riot, after the players persuaded the Ambassador to announce the next performance, whereupon the audience, thinking he was one of England's arch enemy, the Spanish, turned on him and drove him out. In 1597 James Burbage died, and the owner of the land on which The Theatre was built, Giles Allen, refused to renew the lease because as a Puritan he strongly disapproved of playhouses. James's two sons, Richard and Cuthbert, dismantled the building under the cover of night, aided by their troupe which included Shakespeare, carried the materials across the river to Southwark, and built a new playhouse, the Globe. The Curtain, however, continued to host plays right through to the early years of the 17th century.

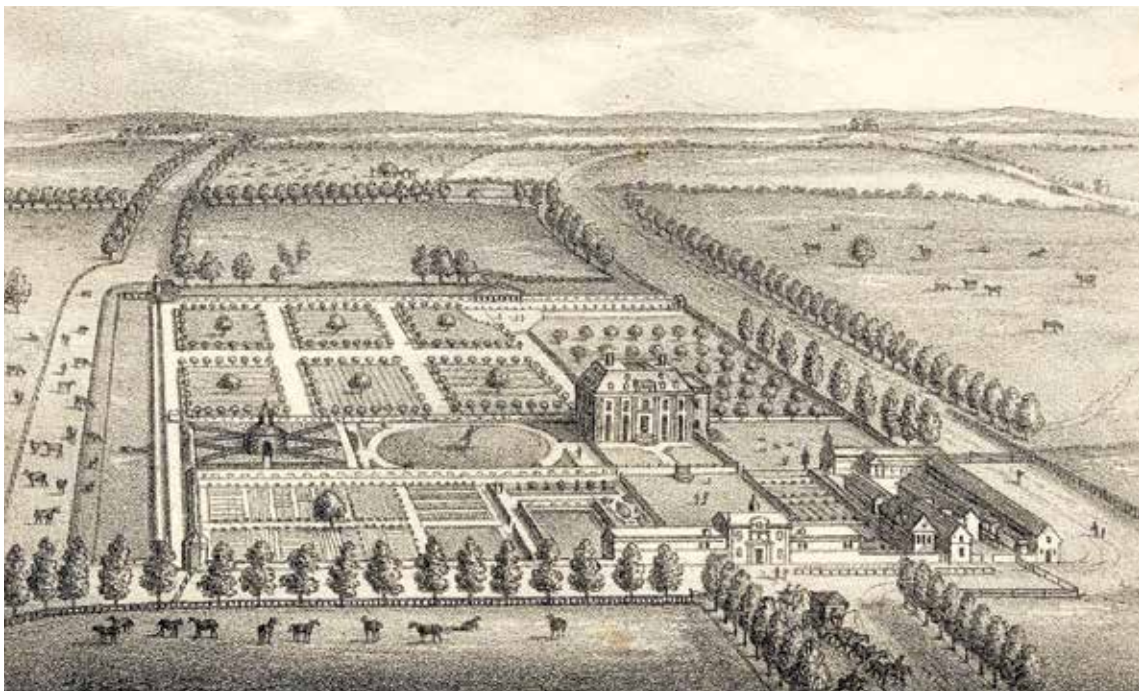
According to John Aubrey, William Shakespeare lived in Shoreditch when he first came to London in the late 1580s, and was thus a neighbour of Christopher Marlowe, who had lodgings in Norton Folgate. Another neighbour was Robert Greene, who is now best known for his attack on Shakespeare in a tract entitled *Greenes Groatsworth-Worth of Witte*, published in 1592, in which he described him as 'an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers'. Greene was very proud of the fact that he had attended both Oxford and Cambridge, while Shakespeare was a country boy with no such connections. By this time Greene had abandoned his wife and children, residing with his prostitute mistress in Holywell Street, now Shoreditch High Street, and earning a precarious living by his hack writing. Not long after his outburst against Shakespeare, he died at the age of 34, either of a surfeit of Rhenish wine and pickled herring or, more prosaically, of the plague.

Away from the raffish perils of Shoreditch life, the aristocrats living in Hackney and Stoke Newington had large, rambling houses with extensive gardens. The grandest was King's Place in Clapton, a 15th-century quadrangular house in the style still to be seen in some Oxford and Cambridge colleges. In the 1530s it was occupied by Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, who had been Anne Boleyn's sweetheart before she captured the attention of Henry VIII. Not only did Percy lose Anne, but also fell deeply into debt, so that the house passed to the Crown, and was refurbished by Thomas Cromwell for the use of the King. In 1536, following the execution of Anne and his marriage to Jane Seymour, Henry was persuaded by his new wife to make peace with his estranged elder daughter Mary, who had not spoken to him for five years. After Mary signed articles declaring she had been

born illegitimate, the King rode out to King's Place where the family reconciliation took place. In the years that followed a whole series of courtiers were to live here, including Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, who died in the house in 1604 and is probably buried in Hackney churchyard. Echoing Robert Greene's sneer about William Shakespeare's lack of education, a body of people firmly believe that de Vere was really the author of his plays.

Among the buildings clustering around the churchyard in 1612 was Church House, probably built a hundred years earlier by Christopher Urswick, adviser to Henry VII, Lord High Almoner, Dean of Windsor and Rector of Hackney (see illustration on p.28). Unusually Urswick chose to reside in Hackney rather than regard it as a sinecure whilst living elsewhere, playing a significant part in the life of the parish and substantially rebuilding the church. Church House stood in spacious grounds, where he entertained leading humanist scholars such as Erasmus and Sir Thomas More.

A neighbouring mansion, where the bus station now resides, was known as the Black and White House, and became the home in the 17th century



Balmes House in what is purported to be a late 16th-century view showing the elaborate layout of the gardens. (Hackney Archives)

Conjectural reconstruction of Sir Ralph Sadleir's house, Bryk Place, as it might have looked when first built in the 1530s. (Richard Bond)